

The Many Forms of Personal Protective Equipment and Their Role in Overall Well-Being

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According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), personal protective equipment, or *PPE*, is “equipment worn to minimize exposure to hazards that cause serious workplace injuries and illnesses.” Within the construction industry, it is likely that many of us gravitate toward the more tangible protective equipment, such as a helmet, safety-toed boots, and a reflective vest. Of course, those are all necessary to protecting one’s physical well-being, but they do very little for the protection of mental and emotional health. However, both physical and psychological PPE are essential to any work community, both in terms of safety, as well as employee productivity.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) states that the construction industry has many safety and health hazards that are required to be eliminated, mitigated or managed including their “focus four” which are: falls, struck-by, caught in and between, and electrocutions; yet, there is often a failure to acknowledge the psychological and psychosocial hazards. NIOSH defines these as “social, organizational and managerial features of the job that affect the worker’s feelings, attitudes, behaviors and psychology” (Le et al., 2023). Despite being more difficult to ascertain, such features still play a key part in an employee’s work ethic. Ultimately, high job demand, low sense of individualism, consistent lack of support and a breakdown in communication from supervisors and managers, all have a role to play—not merely in terms of job satisfaction, but more importantly, in morale and safety.

Common sense tells us that when morale is high and an employee feels valued, there is an increase in their productivity and well-being, but we don’t often consider the other side of this

argument. When the atmosphere exudes lower morale, employees are at a higher risk for workplace incidents, their work suffers, stress increases and they also are at a higher risk to develop physical health effects including cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, sleep disorders and gastrointestinal issues (Le et al., 2023).

How are My Family Relationships Tied to My Overall Health?

According to the Gerontological Society of America, such relationships play a key role in a person's overall well-being. (Thomas et al., 2017). Familial connections are key components of support within every stage of life, with such relationships being integral to an individual's psychological, behavioral and physiological stability. It should hardly be surprising that research has established a clear link between stress and poor mental health. Conversely, social support is an essential protective resource, and not merely for employees, as parents' relationships with their children remains key in ensuring the well-being of *both* generations. According to 2006 research conducted by Graham, Christian, and Kiecolt-Glaser, when familial relationships are in poor health, this can directly impact one's physical health—such examples may include impaired immune function, and (again) even cardiovascular strain (as cited in Thomas et al., 2017). Positive familial connections can be a driving force in one's willingness to live a healthier lifestyle, just as a lack of connectedness can promote behaviors that may compromise one's health. Logic tells us that maintaining better health—both physically and mentally—means less time missed due to illness, and most likely, increased overall job performance. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the whole of the corporation if those in positions of leadership were to place an even greater emphasis on the importance of a work/life balance for *all* employees, thus allowing essential family relationships to thrive.

What Can I Do to Create a Safe Workplace and Good Headspace?

Workplaces inherently have stressful facets, and no matter how hard we might attempt to avoid workplace stress, not all situations will be avoidable. Some such examples might include physical demands, new technology, deadlines, or perhaps, company downsizing. But what does that transfer into? Whether an employee encounters a single stressor or ten of them, the impact is sure to be felt. Stress can make the day-to-day tasks harder to accomplish, as well as leading to increased unhappiness, decreased productivity, and eventually, employees are more likely to experience burn-out. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 83% of workers report suffering from work-related stress (Parker, 2023). More alarmingly, work-related stress has been reported to cause 120,000 deaths each year.

As an Employer, What Actions Can I Take to Assist My Employees?

A 2021 survey published by the American Psychological Association reveals that 85% of employees feel that there are steps employers can take to assist employees with overcoming the stress which is often associated with employment (OSHA, “Workplace Stress,” n.d.). Many of the actions employers can take are quite simple, such as merely acknowledging that employees are unique, as are their circumstances, and it is likely that many individuals also face stressors outside of work. Identify what is making it harder for employees to complete their tasks and help determine what adjustments could be made to lessen the burden. Show empathy so that employees do not feel alone; this can be as simple as recognizing the stress your employees are under, perhaps even offering an “open door policy” which welcomes requests for help. Provide resources to assist employees in coping with the stresses they are under. Be transparent with your future goals and how you plan on having the team achieve them. Speak positively around employees and listen without judgment. When confronted by the added emotional “baggage” of workplace stress, loneliness, uncertainty, isolation, etc., the risks to employee health may become

far greater. *Please note that OSHA's "Workplace Stress," located in the *References* section, does provide a list of resources for upper-level management that is interested in maintaining better mental health for their employees.

Annual U.S. workforce surveys conducted by the APA have consistently found that only about half of workers in the United States are "satisfied with the growth and development opportunities that they have available to them on the job" (Luna, 2019). Additionally, only 58% of U.S. workers say they feel valued by their employer. This sheds light on how a lack of transparency and lack of the opportunity for advancement can translate to job dissatisfaction. According to APA research, employer openness and transparency is directly associated with the trust employees feel toward their employers. Bryce Veon, president and CEO of Autosoft, states the following: "I think some of that, from the top down [...] starts to become the culture (Luna, 2019). The expectation that [...] if you feel a certain way or you don't agree with something or you do like being [...] transparent and open is a good thing to have." Veon works toward an atmosphere of transparency by having established a set period of time to have check-ins with his employees, almost like performance reviews. "And I think that [...] having the one-on-ones at one point we actually had one-on-ones weekly, and some departments would do [...] just a quick twenty minute one-on-one with each of their employees and just get a feel for how they're doing and with how they're feeling."

Concluding Remarks

Employers (including higher-level management) are busy, as are employees, but as we can see from Veon's implementation of regular check-ins with employees, one need not have a whole lot of time to spare in order to ensure the well-being of their employees—and ultimately, their company. Evidence makes it apparent that when employees have a good work/life balance,

are supported, feel valued and informed, and clearly understand their responsibilities, morale, productivity, and overall mental state increase as well. There is no blanket approach that will work for every business, but coming up with a comprehensive plan to resolve issues of confusion and reduce stress, as well as building rapport and developing coping strategies, is paramount in maintaining a healthy organization.

References

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